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A Brief Discussion on the Historical Background of the Farakka Dam

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Abstract

This research paper examines the historical context and criticism surrounding the construction of the Farakka Dam on the Ganges River in the village of Farakka in Murshidabad district of West Bengal. It is hoped that it will play an important role in resolving the conflicts and mutual recriminations that have arisen between India's neighboring states (especially West Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand) and between India and Bangladesh over the construction of the Farakka Dam. And along with that, this research paper will review in detail the noble purpose of building the Farakka Dam to revitalize the then second largest port of Kolkata in India and will provide details about the location and accessibility of the Farakka Dam, which can contribute to resolving long-standing water conflicts and achieving integrated water resources management in the Ganga basin.

Keywords: *Farakka dam, Location and Accessibility, Objectives, Historical Background, Criticism*

Introduction

Farakka Dam consists of a barrage structure on the river Ganges at Farakka with a feeder canal of 38.38 km length towards Bhagirathi River. This barrage is located on the river Ganges bordering a village called Farakka in the Murshidabad district of the Indian state of West Bengal. The Barrage on the river Ganges is named Farakka Barrage after this Farakka village. The barrage is located about 18 k.m from the Bangladesh border. Under the initiative of the Government of India, Hindustan Construction Company with the help of the then Soviet Union, with a plan to spend about Rs 156.293 crores on 11785.77 acres of land, work began in 1961 and work was completed in 1971. It took another four years to dig the 38.38 km long Feeder Canal. The Barrage was officially inaugurated and dedicated to the nation on 21 April 1975. The Farakka barrage is 2,280 meters (7,350 feet) long. This barrage has a total of 109 gates.[1]

The main purpose of the construction of the barrage is to flush out the silt, which enter the Calcutta port throughout the year, and thus to check the deterioration that has threatened the existence of the port. The city has a population of more than eight million and the operation of Calcutta port directly affects the well being of over 100 million people in the hinterland, which is much more than the population of Bangladesh. Indeed, the rational of saving Calcutta city and port impinges upon the economy of as many as 13 States of India as well as the neighbouring countries of Nepal and Bhutan. The industrial and commercial activities located in the area cover some of the most vital sectors of the Indian economy including minerals and metals, transport machinery, steel, textile, tea, jute, food processing and leather industries. The utilisation of the Ganga waters by India for such vital purpose, affecting the lives of such large segment of the Indian society, could by no stretch of imagination be characterised as wasteful.[2]

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Location and accessibility

The right bank of this dam, constructed over the River Ganges, was located at Farakka Ghat near Farakka in the Murshidabad district while the left bank was situated at Khajurighat in the Malda district of West Bengal. Farakka and Khezuriaghat were both railway stations on the Eastern Railway. The barrage site is also accessible via metalled roads from Maldah (35 km) and Murshidabad (80 km). This dam is located 300 km north of Kolkata and 270 km south of Siliguri. It is the starting point of North Bengal or the ending point of South Bengal between North Bengal and South Bengal of West Bengal. Sahebganj and Pakur districts of Jharkhand state to the north of this barrage, Bangladesh to the south, Murshidabad district to the west and Malda district to the east. The dam is located 18 km from the Bangladesh border. It is not only a dam but also serves as a road and rail communication barrage. N.H. 34 and Malda Division of Eastern Railway pass over this embankment. It plays a major role not only between West Bengal in North Bengal and South Bengal, but also in connecting the North Eastern part of India with the rest of India.[3]

Objectives of construction of Farakka Dam

Although the need for a dam at Farakka had long been felt, the Delhi-based British Indian government was unable to build it. It was only after independence in 1947 that the newly formed independent government took up its plans with the following objectives.

a) In particular, ensuring uninterrupted water supply from the Ganges to the Bhagirathi-Hooghly river system during the dry season; increasing the capacity to handle tidal pressure; revitalizing the Kolkata Port by removing residual silt during high tide; equipping the port to handle larger quantities of cargo; and reducing the cost of dredging and port infrastructure.
b) To restore the perennial waterway between Kolkata and North India along the Ganges – Bhagirathi – Hooghly through a connecting canal between the Ganges and Bhagirathi.
c) If the water-holding capacity of the river increases, the risk of flooding on both banks during the monsoon season will decrease, and the pressure on the drainage system will be reduced.
d) The salinity level of the Hooghly River near Kolkata will return to drinkable levels; this will improve water supply to the city and its suburbs, protect industrial machinery using river water, and increase agricultural production as salinity in soil and groundwater decreases.
e) If a rail-cum-road bridge is constructed over the dam, connectivity will be re-established between the people of the divided regions on the northern and southern banks of the Ganges.[4]

Historical background of the construction of Farakka Dam

The primary objective behind the construction of the Farakka Dam was the improvement of the Port of Calcutta. So the construction of Farakka Dam has a long historical context. Long before the partition of India, constant efforts were made to maintain uninterrupted navigation on the Hooghly waterway and to save the port of Calcutta from being lost, and committees of experts were appointed from time to time, as the port of Calcutta was the largest and most important port on the eastern coast of India. The port of Kolkata is located on the eastern bank of the Hooghly River and is about 129 kilometers or 80 miles inland from the river's junction with the sea. 45% of India's exports and 31% of imports were through this port, all the North Eastern Indian states like Bihar, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, Assam etc. And foreign countries like Nepal, Bhutan etc. Used to take trade facilities through this port. Since ancient times, this port has been sustained by the water supply of Ganges through the main stream Bhagirathi, then the source of Bhagirathi was somewhere below Rajmahal, over time the source of Bhagirathi gradually shifted downwards. After passing through various natural calamities, Farakka, Dhuliani etc. Reached a place called Biswanathpur by 1700 AD. After that a terrible earthquake in 1760 caused a drastic change in the course of the Ganges and the main course of the Ganges flowed towards the Padma and silted up the banks at the source of the Bhagirathi. Tides play in the Hooghly

river throughout the year. During high tide, sea sand is quickly brought up and deposited on the surface of the river from both sides of the harbor area, which cannot be completely washed away by the ebb tide. So the river bed continues to high. The fresh water from the Ganges has been blocked at the mouth of Bhagirathi and has continuously decreased, thereby accelerating the process of polysism without being able to wash the accumulated sediments downstream. Added to this is the alluvium from the Ganges during floods and the broken soil of the banks of the long Bhagirathi Hooghly river. All in all, river basins and port areas have increased sedimentation and stopped shipping over the past few decades.

Thus, natural calamities have led to the deterioration of Bhagirathi river since 1700 AD and the navigability of Bhagirathi-Hooghly river has gradually decreased due to the change of source of Bhagirathi and sedimentation. In 1938, 90,000 cusecs of Ganga water flowed through Bhagirathi during the monsoon, but in 1960, the reservoir dried up and reduced to less than 2,000 cusecs. At the same time, the Calcutta port crisis, floods in the Gangetic valley, and riverine trade deficits increased. Along with this, drinking water problems, water supply problems in factories and Kolkata's water purification problems have also increased. Moreover, ships coming towards Calcutta port are forced to change their course due to lack of sufficient depth. Whereas in 1938, ships with a depth of 7.9 meters could visit the port throughout the year, in 1962 ships of the same depth visited the port only 60 days a year. During that period, the cargo handling capacity of Kolkata Port also fell from 11 million tonnes to 8 million tonnes.

There are also indications that the British rulers were apprehensive about the future of Calcutta port as early as 1795. As the closure of this vital port would mean a reduction in the amount of raw materials and agricultural produce transported to the mother country, a committee was appointed to inquire into the condition of Hooghly. Thus, as early as 1795, the British were aware that Calcutta port was in danger of being closed unless the headwater flow of the Hooghly was artificially increased.[5]

In one word, the city and port of kolkata can be identified as the platform of development of the entire North East India. Therefore, it's destruction means the financial disaster of the whole country. Therefore, it is necessary to prevent the destruction of kolkata port in any way. To achieve this objective, experts who have studied this problem are : -

1853 :Sir Arthur Cotton and other experts invited by the Bengal Chamber of Commerce.

He was British General and Irrigation Engineer. Sir Arthur Cotton came to India in 1853 and visited the BhagirathiHooghly and Ganges region with a view to solving the Calcutta port problem and made a proposal. According to him, by constructing a barrage on the Ganga near Rajmahal and a canal connecting the Ganga with the Bhagirathi, through that canal the excess fresh water of the Ganges is discharged into the Bhagirathi-Hooghly channel and keeps it flowing during the dry season, such excess Storm lights can make a difference in preventing the Hooghly from silting up.[6]

1854 : Committee on state of river Hooghly.

This commission was constituted by the Government of India in 1853 to 1854 to study the condition of the Hooghly River. This Commission studied from a scientific point of view and reported that due to shoaling and narrowing of its deep channels due to accumulation of sediments it has gradually deteriorated and As the river Hooghly and the port of Calcutta are of the highest importance, the most strenuous efforts should be made, and every means used and every check observed, so that the navigation of these rivers may not be hindered in future, At least from Calcutta to Hooghly Point should be attempted and for this, efforts should be made to ensure annual water supply as much as possible from the three main feeder heads of the Hooghly.[7]

1861 : Prestige Franklin.

This commission reports that both the Bhagirathi and Jalangi estuaries are cut off from the Ganges for most of the year, the government should ensure that there is a good water supply between the Hooghly and the Ganges during all seasons of the year.

1864: Mr. H. Leonard with other experts

H. Leonard, Assistant Engineer in the Department of public works, visited the major European rivers that were then being developed, and was asked to report on the rivers in 1864. He consulted sir Charles Hartley, Engineer of the Danube Commission and in June of the following year submitted a report reviewing the general hydraulic elements of the maintenance of the Hooghly and the condition of important points for navigation. He agreed with the majority of the commission that the Hooghly should be developed, but slowly, considering who the companies working on the river are and it would be difficult to come to any other conclusion.[8]

1872: Mr. G. Robertson, Harbour Engineer for India.

The report of this commission is that the condition of Hooghly is getting worse day by day.

1896 : Mr.L.F. Vernon Harcourt.

A river engineer, was commissioned by the Bengal Chamber of Commerce in 1896 to undertake a study of the condition of the Hooghly and Calcutta ports. He submitted a complete report inspecting the main Ganga from the rivers, feeders and the sea. The following is a relevant extract:

He compares different channels and surveys of the Hooghly River to show that it is a fairly stable river, with considerable depth fluctuations in some places depending on the season and the amount of freshet. But the Hooghly river from Calcutta to the sea is generally free from degradation, unless some unexpected change in the course of the Ganges or some earthquake or cyclone alters the existing conditions and if the various obstructions to the river can be removed and some improvements made in the estuary, the Hooghly will in future provide a considerably better waterway between Calcutta and the sea than it has in the past.[9]

1902:Committee appointed by the port Commissioners. This committee reported that the Bhagirathi-Hooghly from the confluence of the Padma river to Calcutta has gradually deteriorated.

1914- 15 : Major Hirst.

He studied the Hooghly River and its headwaters and reported that the current regime of the Hooghly River was completely unsafe and the forces controlling it were so strong that any artificial intervention would be futile and the river has deteriorated to such an extent that it poses a threat to Calcutta port.

1916-1919 : Stevenson Moore Committee.

Stevenson Moore Committee submitted a report on the study of Hooghly river and its headwaters, the relevant extract of which is - The headwaters of the Nadia river have been heavily silted, which will reduce the salinity of the Hooghly. To solve this problem, this committee recommended diversion of Ganga water.

1919 : Mr.H.G. Reaks. (River Surveyor).

Mr. H.G. Reaks after extensive experiments concluded that the Calcutta harbor and Hooghly channels are capable of considerable improvement, if the Hooghly River is kept in a healthy condition by maintaining the supply of fresh water from the Ganges and the tidal volume of the Hooghly River.

1930 : Sir William Willcocks, British Engineer, in Restoration of Ancient Irrigation of Bengal.

Sir William Wilcox felt that keeping a good supply of water in the Ganges in winter and summer would be of great value to the ports of Hooghly and Calcutta, and he was convinced that barrage on the Ganges would be necessary in the future.

1939 : Mr. T. M. Oag, Deputy River Surveyor, CPC.

He observed the Calcutta port and recommended that barrages on the Ganga were essential not only to supply excess Ganga water during the dry season but also to control the siltation of the Hooghly River.[10]

1946: Mr. A Webster, Chief Engineer, Calcutta port.

He recommended raising 10,000 cusecs of water in the Hooghly river as well as building a barrage on the Ganges for dredging and training the river at low levels.[11]

1952 : Man Singh Committee.

This committee examined various problems of Calcutta port and the Hooghly River and reported in 1952 that the condition of the Hooghly River between Nabadwip and Calcutta had deteriorated. He suggested additional supply of Ganga water at the head of Hooghly river and suggested construction of a barrage at Farakka to supply this water.

1953 : S.C Majumdar, Chief Engineer Central Water and Power Commission in Ganga Barrage and the Bhagirathi- Hooghly river problems.

He observes that the Bhagirathi-Hooghly rivers are now isolated from the Ganga except during floods and remain so during normal times. Hence the barrage on the Ganges is essential for the purpose of supplying about 20,000 cusecs of water from the Ganges through the Bhagirathi throughout the year for the benefit of Calcutta port.

1957: Dr. I. W. Hensen, German Engineer, in ' Review of the problems of the Port of Kolkata'.

He studied the problem of Calcutta harbor and suggested that long-term interconnected changes have occurred in Bhagirathi and lower Hooghly, adversely affecting tidal development, carrying capacity and salinity of Bhagirathi and Hooghly. As a result, the discharge of water from the Ganga has decreased over time.

The best and only technical solution to this is the construction of a barrage on the Ganges at Farakka, which would stop the long-term deterioration of Kolkata Port and Bhagirathi-Hooghly and probably lead to gradual improvement.

The expert and expert committee reports have an impressive consensus of options on the need for perennial upland supply to the Hooghly river through the Bhagirathi to solve the problem. Several reports have significant agreement on one or more of the following assumptions: There is continuous deterioration of the navigable waterways of three rivers from the Ganges namely Bhagirathi, Jalangi and Mathabhanga and the upper Hooghly River and consequently the lower Hooghly River and Calcutta.

i) The efficiency or improvement limit of dredging or river work has been reached and dredging will not be able to maintain even depth in Hooghly River.

ii) Prolongation of head water supply is essential to permanently maintain the Hooghly River to its present standard. And

iii) A barrage on the river Ganges is essential to ensure adequate headwater supply for the long-term preservation of the navigable seaway in Calcutta.[12]

During the partition process, the West Bengal Engineers requested the Bengal Boundary Commission that it was crucial for the maintenance of Calcutta port to divert the main waters of Hooghly, i.e. Bhagirathi, Jalangi, Mathabhanga. Ganges should be in the state of West Bengal within the Indian Union. The case was contested by Pakistan but apparently swayed by Indian arguments, Sir Cyril Radcliffe, chairman of the Boundary Commission, gave the Indian Muslim-majority district of Murshidabad in exchange for the Hindumajority area of Khulna district, which was transferred to East Pakistan.[13]

In October 1952, the Expert Committee, appointed by the Government of India, reiterated the need for upland supply and recommended the construction of barrages on the Ganges.

In 1957, Government of India Prof. Dr. W. Hensen, Director, Research Institute, Hydraulics and Foundation Structure Engineering, invited Hanover to examine the problem of the Calcutta port on the Hooghly River and the Bhagirathi River. After criticizing various aspects related to this river system such as seasonal and longterm changes in the depth of various bars and crossings, changes in salinity, changes in bore intensity and frequency, etc., Prof. Hensen opined that the Hooghly and Bhagirathi, if left to themselves,

would gradually There will be considerable deterioration. Eventually, the river's depth and cross-section will deteriorate to such an extent that the Ganga will carry only the run-off from its own catchment that it now receives, with no discharge from the Ganga. If the Ganga to Bhagirathi and Jalangi journeys are stopped for the entire year, the existing capacity will also come down to a third. This can be disastrous for navigation and all other interests in Hooghly. He suggested that-

i) The best and only technical solution to the problem is to construct a barrage on the Ganges at Farakka through which the upland discharge at Bhagirathi-Hooghly can be stopped and possibly converted into a gradual uplift with a controlled upland discharge, prolonged freshets will be obtained and sudden freshets Peaks that cause heavy sand movement and bank erosion will be leveled.

ii) The above five bars and crossings i.e. Panchpara, Sankrail, Munikhali, Pir Serang and Pujali will be upgraded.

iii) The following four bars viz., Eastern Gut, Moapur, Raipur and Ninan will be developed with the construction of training works.

iv) Along with upland drainage and training works and/or dredging in some bars, no additional inconvenience shall be faced in bars and crossings considered above. The measures taken in the Ganga-Bhagirathi-Hooghly channel will not have any adverse effect on the estuary downstream of Diamond Harbour.

v) Tidal reach will be improved, and the frequency and intensity of bores will be reduced.

vi) Water supply to Kolkata city and its industrial areas will be improved by reducing salinity.

The dredging capacity of Bhagirathi and upper Hooghly will be improved and the risk of flooding in the catchment area will be reduced and sanitation and public health will be improved.

Thus for more than a century experts and expert committees and engineers offered their thoughts on Calcutta port and the Bhagirathi-Hooghly problem and unanimously decided to construct the Farakka Barrage.[14]

Criticism on construction of Farakka Dam

The Farakka Dam was built by the Government of India at Farakka on the Ganges River to solve various problems of the Hooghly River and restore the port of Calcutta. In the context of the construction of this Farakka dam, as many experts and expert committees have given their opinion in favor of the construction, so many experts and expert committees have also given their opinion against the construction of this dam. Notable among the experts and expert committees who opined against the construction of this dam are –

1962 : Kapil Bhattacharya, Superintending Engineer, I & W Directorate Government of West Bengal in silting of Calcutta Port.

He strongly criticized and strongly opposed the construction of the Farakka Dam. According to him, the situation will become more complicated if a dam is constructed on the Ganges at Farakka. He gave various arguments against the construction of the dam.

Firstly: The main objective of the dam construction is to supply 40,000 cusecs of water per second from the Ganga to the Bhagirathi-Hooghly river through a feeder canal and to revitalize the Kolkata port. He vehemently rejected this view saying that the required 40,000 cusecs of water would not be available from Farakka during the dry season.

Secondly: According to him, the Padma River is also tidal, so if the Farakka Barrage disrupts the flow of the Ganges during the dry season, the tidal sediments will fill the Padma basin and reduce and reverse the slope

in the Padma sector. As a result, the Brahmaputra overflows during floods and the Padma flows upstream through rivers like Bhairava, Mathabhanga and Jalangi to cause flooding in West Bengal.

Thirty: According to him, the floor of the concrete barrage is not being built below the level of the Ganga channel. So, during heavy floods, the flow of Ganges which would have cut the channel of the Ganga and deepened it to 50-150 feet, would no longer be possible. Hence the maximum flow capacity of the Ganges will be severely disrupted. As a result, the overflow of Farakka barrage will flood Malda Murshidabad district every year. Patna, Barauni, Uttarmunger, Bhagalpur and Purnia districts of Bihar will also sink every year. The Ganges basin in Bihar will gradually fill up, the barrage's barrier to water will slow down and flood-borne silt will fall into the river.[15]

1962 : prof. Arthur T. Ippen and Clarence F. Wicker (USA), engaged by Pakistan Government in the Hooghly river problem.

They criticized the construction of Farakka barrage and gave some opinion against it. If flushing with fresh water is beneficial, and at least some observations made in Hooghly indicate the opposite, they suggest that siltation in Hooghly is due to an important variable i.e. salinity. Their more unique observations are:

The freshwater diversion in the Hooghly will not remove the sediment, but will attract more or the intrusion of salinity along with the freshwater inflow will increase the amount of sediment in the Hooghly.

At present dredging practices were contributing to siltation in the Hooghly which required more dredging.

The Calcutta port has not received adequate technical investigation into the complex problems of model studies for its conservation, mixed mixing and salinity intrusion into fresh water.[16]

1969: S.R Basu and S.C Chakravarty, Geologists.

They strongly criticized the construction of Farakka Dam and said that we are not suggesting that Farakka Dam will or will not solve the fundamental problems of Calcutta port economy. We just want to emphasize that a project like Farakka can completely reverse the erosion process of Bhagirathi. If we want to revive Bhagirathi, let us first understand the source of the problem and then help to solve the problem in the way that this problem is solved. We cannot allow erosion to continue in all the thalwegs of the right bank tributaries in the hope of clearing the bed of the Bhagirathi.[17]

Conclusion

Just as the construction of the Farakka Barrage possesses a historical background, it also holds historical significance. The plan for constructing this barrage was not conceived solely by the government of independent India; rather, the concept was first formulated by the British government much earlier—during the 18th century. To facilitate this project, the British government, beginning in the 18th century, successively constituted numerous committees and expert panels to review the proposal. Subsequently, the government of independent India also formed several expert committees to conduct further reviews; ultimately reaching a final decision to proceed with the construction, work on the barrage commenced in 1961 and was completed in 1975, whereupon it was dedicated to the nation. Although the dam was originally built to revitalize the Kolkata port, its construction has brought many benefits to the people of West Bengal—especially in the areas of hydroelectric power generation, agriculture, and transportation. It also has a significant impact on the daily lives of the people. It is considered a major source of fresh water; in fact, the dam diverts water from the Ganges River, stretching from Malda to Kolkata, purifies it, and then supplies it as drinking water. Moreover, in terms of connectivity, the dam not only provides an important link between North and South Bengal within the state, but also plays a key role in connecting the northeastern region of the country with the rest of India. Thus, it plays a very important role in the lives of the people of both West Bengal and India as a whole.

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